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"Shakespeare to Seuss: Censors Widen Their Agenda"
by Michael Reynolds / Reuters

"When shall we three meet again, in thunder, lightning, or in rain?"

Cancel that horrid reunion, say zealous censorship groups.

The three "weird sisters" in Shakespeare's "Macbeth" are under attack, along with Stephen King's ghouls and the undead legions of American pulp fiction.

"The fastest growing area of censorship is that of witchcraft", says Judy Krug of the American Library Association. "Witches, witchcraft, demons and the supernatural are all interchangeable."

Krug told a recent panel that censorship groups have widened their agenda to press for new legislation which would attempt to bury "Macbeth" and "everything (horror novelist) Stephen King writes."

Along with "Macbeth", whose three crones grace the Scottish tragedy, Shakespeare's "Hamlet", "The Tempest", and "A Midsummer Night's Dream" have been removed from schools and libraries throughout the United States, according to Krug.

One publishing-industry source said some publishers are taking pre-emptive action to avoid the wrath of would-be censors.

Dark Harvest, a small company specializing in horror fiction, published a novel in hardcover titled "Crucifax Autumn", which contained a chapter in which a demon swallowed an aborted fetus.

When a major New York publishing house reprinted the novel in paperback, the potentially offensive chapter had been ommitted.

"They're trying to omit any suggestion of Satanism", said the source. "But that's what people want. And the more graphic, the better."

The drive against witchcraft extends to Halloween, Krug said. Hallow-een celebrations were banned this year in Frederick County, Maryland after a similar banning last year in schools and other public settings in Levy County, Florida. The latter ban was lifted this year.

Witchcraft wasn't the only item on the censors' agenda, according to panelists at the recent Miami Book Fair International.

Oren Teichner of the American Booksellers Association said that despite acquittals in two recent highly-publicized obscenity cases--the Robert Mapplethorpe photography exhibit in Cincinnati and a rap concert by 2 Live Crew in Florida--organized, well-funded censorship remains a threat to artistic and intellectual freedom as well as to constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech.

Among the works labeled "culturally insensitive" by such censorship groups are Mark Twain's "Huckleberry Finn" and Dr. Suess's children's book "The Lorax".

Krug said the perennial banning of J.D. Salinger's "The Catcher in the Rye" and John Steinbeck's "Of Mice and Men" was due to the allegedly "vulgar" language in the novels.

But censors hunting for profane language often overlook or ignore the context, she said, adding that "reading and proofreading are two different activities".

David Ogden, a Washington attorney specializing in free-speech cases, criticized a so-called pornography victims bill sponsored by Senator

Mitch McConnell of Kentucky.

If enacted, the statute would level criminal charges and damages against any publisher of alleged pornographic material which a rapist or murderer claims may have caused him to commit a crime.

"It's a very scary law", said Ogden, who explained that McConnell's proposed bill had its origin in serial killer Ted Bundy's assertion that pornography led him to commit murder. Critics said Bundy was merely trying to stall his execution.

Ogden said that although McConnell's bill had recently been blocked, "if he ever got a vote on it, who knows?

"It's getting strange out there."